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**Discovering Chinese Economic History from Footnotes: the
Living Tale of a Private Merchant Archive (1800-1850)**

Debin Ma, London School of Economics and
Weipeng Yuan, Chinese Academy of Social Science, Beijing, China

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Department of Economics

Discovering Chinese Economic History from Footnotes: the Living Tale of a Private Merchant Archive (1800-1850)

Debin Ma
Economic History Department
London School of Economics
London, UK.
Email: d.ma1@lse.ac.uk

Weipeng Yuan
Institute of Economic Research
Chinese Academy of Social Science
Beijing, China
Email: yuanwp12@tom.com

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Abstract: This article recounts our unique encounter –through the last seven years of our research - with the Tong Taisheng (统泰升) merchant account books in the Ninjing county of Northern China in 1800-1850. By tracing the personal history of the original owner or donor, we address a large historiographical and epistemological issue behind the current Great Divergence debate on why Industrial Revolution occurred in England but not in China. Our article showcases how the development of political ideology and academic discipline in the modern era impacts our understanding of historical statistics and realities of the early modern era, a critical issue largely neglected in the current Great Divergence debate.

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Discovering Chinese Economic History from Footnotes: the Living Tale of a Private Merchant Archive (1800-1850)¹

The recent Great Divergence debate on the question of why the Industrial Revolution first took place in Britain or Europe, but not in China or Asia has seized the attention and imagination of economic historians worldwide during the past two decades.² The claim by the revisionist school that living standards in 18th century China – at least in the advanced region of the Lower Yangzi – may be comparable to Northwestern Europe as late as the 18th century has promoted a flurry of new research, re-examining China's price and wage history in comparative perspective (see Broadberry and Gupta 2006, Allen et al 2011). The debate, however, has brought to the fore serious deficiencies in Chinese historical statistics. Indeed, reviewing the existing evidences, Allen et al (2011) points out that: “on the Chinese side, the claims of a higher living standard in 18th century China relied largely on indirect comparisons based on scattered output, consumption, or demographic data. In contrast, the literature on real incomes in Europe is broad and deep because since the mid-19th century scholars have been compiling databases of wages and prices for European cities from the late middle ages into the nineteenth century.” (p. 9). The fragile nature of our knowledge of the Chinese past was echoed by a 1992 presidential address delivered to the Association of Asian Studies by Albert Furerwerker: “Questions about China's early modern economic history that I wish I could answer”.

Indeed, Chinese economic history lacked the most basic statistics such as a reasonably consistent price index both at the regional or national level for the 18-19th century.³ The nature of Chinese historical statistics itself raises a critical question germane to the core of the Debate: is the paucity of statistics a result of poor record keeping in historical China – which itself may be a reflection of the nature of her economy and society – or more a reflection of the poor state of academic scholarship and archival collection in China's subsequent

¹ For Chinese names cited in the text and references, we follow the Chinese convention of surname name first and first name last.

² See Pomeranz 2000 and also Ma 2004 for a summary of these hypotheses.

³ See Allen et al 2011. The only reliable benchmark national level Chinese GDP is for the early 1930s, see Ma 2008.

tumultuous modern history? The same question could be posed for Western historical statistics, which seem so favourably endowed with historical and statistical records preserved from ancient times. The argument can be echoed by existence of far richer statistical records for territories colonized by Europe (or even by Japan in the case of Korea and Taiwan in the early 20th century) than those untouched by colonization.⁴

The debate on the quality and nature of historical economic statistics raises a much greater historiographical issue in the Great Divergence debate. Indeed, the ghost of the Chinese problem with the Industrial Revolution had haunted the Chinese consciousness – academics, politicians and revolutionaries – ever since China’s forced opening by Western Imperialism in the mid-19th century. Writing in 1939, the then young Communist revolutionary leader, Mao Zedong, famously remarked that “China’s feudal society carried within itself the seeds of capitalism, China would of herself have developed slowly into a capitalism even without the impact of foreign capitalism.” Mao’s one time statement embedded in what would be widely regarded as a highly “Euro-centric” Marxist framework of Historical Materialism, enshrined following the founding of Communist China, sparked waves of intellectual scholarship within China on the so-called “sprouts of capitalism” that aimed to unveil the existence of those seeds or “sprouts”.⁵

The introduction of Historical Materialism and its later enshrinement as an official ideology in the People’s Republic of China from 1949 had profound consequences on the Chinese course of development and more importantly on her historical research. Ultimately, the visions and theoretical framework regarding history interfered with historical realities and statistics themselves. This distinction between our knowledge and reality of history is critical but largely neglected in the current Great Divergence debate. In this article, we illustrate this thesis through our unique encounter – through the last seven years of our research – with the Tong Taisheng (统泰升) (referred to as TTS hereafter) merchant account books and our rediscovery of the original owner or donor. The TTS archive – consisting of over 400 volumes for a single store – contains detailed records of actual market transactions in grain

⁴ See Mizoguchi and Umemura 1988 for Japanese colonial statistics of Taiwan and Korea.

⁵ Mao’s statement is in his article titled “Chinese revolution and Chinese Community Party” written originally in 1939. See Mao 1961/65, p. 309. Mao’s original 1939 statement did not have the wording of “seeds of capitalism”. It was added later in the early 1950s with Mao’s approval. See Feng 2006 and He 2010 for a recent summary of the stages and “sprouts of capitalism” debate.

but mostly non-grain commodities and also includes local copper cash/silver exchange rates from a largely unknown Northern Chinese village township in the period 1800-1850 – a period before China’s forced opening to the West. Our story both on a personal and scholarly level speaks to larger historiographical and epistemological issues behind the knowledge dimension of the Great Divergence debate. It shows that in a nation marked by fundamental historical discontinuities and political upheavals in the last two centuries, our examination of early modern Chinese history can no longer be divorced from those large reversals in political and social realities that ultimately impacted historical record-keeping and academic scholarship.⁶

I. The Tongtai Sheng Archive

In a widely used statistical manual for Chinese economic history compiled in 1955 by Professor Yan Zhongping and ten other eminent economic historians, two tables (Tables 30 and 31 on pp. 37-38) and a figure (p. 39) are included that provide relatively continuous annual series of copper cash/silver exchange rates and two price indices for agricultural and handicraft goods (in copper cash) respectively for the period of 1798-1800. These three pages of highly condensed statistical series stand out as a glaring anomaly in the dark alley of Chinese historical statistics. Hence, despite the brevity of the explanation, they have not escaped the attention of researchers. The Ningjing series appeared frequently in some of the most influential works on China’s pre modern monetary sector and often served as the key (or only) systematic data series for evaluating China’s balance of payment crisis caused by silver outflow, leading eventually to the fateful Opium War of 1842 – a watershed event in modern Chinese history (See Lin Manhong 2006, Chen Chaonan 1975, Vogel 1987).

Embedded in the footnotes to these two tables are brief explanations of the statistical methodology of constructing the exchange rate series and the number of items included in the construction of these price indices. They also indicated that the original data were extracted from a grocery store called Tong Taisheng (统泰升), located in the town of Daliu of Ningjing county in the Northern part of Zhili province (roughly corresponding to today’s Hebei province). The footnotes also mentioned the original Tong Taisheng archives housed in the

⁶ This article represents the first of our series of systematic efforts to uncover both thorough statistics and a historical narrative to reconstruct the history of the TTS archive, including the Tongtai Sheng firm, Ningjing county and the larger Northern Chinese economy on the eve of the Opium War.

National Library and in part in the Institute library of the Chinese academy of Social Science in Beijing. In 2005, we keyed in – just in case - the TTS merchant accounts in the online catalogue of the National Library in Beijing, to our complete disbelief, the title just popped up on the screen. While one often hears of those dramatic stories of scholars missing the significance of footnotes, it is hard to envision the elapse of five decades since 1955, that saw the intellectual destruction of the ten year interlude of Cultural Revolution and other radical anti-intellectual activities would not completely erode the validity of some small-font footnotes.

All in all, our subsequent journeys to both the National Library and Institute library of the Chinese academy of Social Science have turned up 437 volumes of these account books for the period of 1798-1850. Table 1 provides a breakdown of all the volumes by decades.

Table 1, The Existing volumes of Tong Taishen Merchant Accounts by decade

Decades	Total Volumes	Annual Average	Notes
1798-1810	67	5.2	Only 2 volumes for 1798
1811-1820	54	5.4	
1821-1830	85	8.5	
1831-1840	104	10.4	
1841-1850	100	10	20 volumes for year 1844 only
unclear	27		
Total	437	8.2	

Notes: Except for five volumes archived at the Institute of Economic Research of Chinese Academy of Social Science, the rest are in National Library in Beijing.

The account book reveals TTS to be a local retail grocery store selling a large variety of dry goods including rice, iron tools, paper, cloth, cord pieces, pigment and daily necessities like oil, vinegar sauce, wine, grains and so on. We can broadly classify the TTS account books into three categories according to their contents and functions. The first is the Original account book of the sales counter. They are mainly journals kept by shop assistants to record transactions of cash and goods in copper cash and silver, i.e. a liushui account book (flowing account book, daybook) for the further categorizing and auditing by the counting house. This is the most rudimentary commercial document, which occupies a large portion of TTS

account books. The second type of account is known as the ‘posted account book’ They largely include the ‘jiao yi zong zhang’ (general trade ledger), which were recorded according to the name of a business house or a customer respectively, the time, name, volume, unit price of clients’ purchases, time and amount of payment. The final category includes various miscellaneous account books, which cover temporary dealings and transactions, accounts on loans, land purchases, income from interest on loans and etc.⁷

Both the detail and quality of the data are staggering for a micro-data set for Chinese economic history. The account books provide records of copper silver exchange rates with transaction dates, quantities, five and six different types of silver used, interest rates embedded in the exchange rates and names of clients all in daily frequency. They also contain prices of about 40 or 50 types of commodities with similar degrees of detail. In a separate study, we have accumulated over 11 thousand data points of exchange rates based on the use of only 17 account books of silver liushiuzhang. It was very clear, the original studies by Yan Zhongping et al, a critically important study on its own right, only utilized a tiny fraction of the data sets (see Ma and Yuan, research in progress).

Why was this record preserved in such an exceptionally good and well-ordered condition? Where does this archive come from? Who was the owner of this archive? Why did Yan et al never mention him or her?

II. The Re-discovery

In April, 2008, we visited the Ninjing county and the towns of Daliu, Changwan and Chaiwu. Dà Liǔ Zhèn [大柳镇] where the TTS firm was located was a small market town in the Níngjīn County, [宁津县], currently a county of the Prefecture Dézhōu Shì [德州市] in Shāndōng Province. It was about 240 kilometers south of Běijīng, close to the border of Héběi Province and leaning towards the east of the historical Grand Canal. With the massive building of rural highway infrastructure during the past two decades, commercial activities in these towns have largely shifted out of the traditional town center, called the “old street” (老街) in Da Liu towards a spattering of stores and restaurants along a rural highway, modern,

⁷ The details of the accounts and accounting methods are analyzed in Yuan, Macve and Ma 2013.

dusty and homogenous. What remained alongside the original “old street” (老街) were clusters of residences interspersed with a few shops, postal offices and governmental buildings built or rebuilt largely during the Mao era. For the few locals with whom we conversed, the “old street” evoked tales of the 1950s rather than the 1850s.

Our visit to the Ningjin county archival office turned up nothing on TTS. The Ningjin county gazette dated to the Qing Guangxu period (1875-1908) reports Da Liu town as holding periodic markets (集场) on every 2nd and 7th of the month, a Temple festival (庙会) every September.⁸ Yan et al noted over ten branch stores of Tong Taisheng spread across a couple of nearby market towns such as Changwan (长湾), Chaihu (柴胡), each within about a 10 kilometres radius of Da Liu. Based on our estimates from the account books, the annual average volume of transactions at TTS would rank in the category of medium sized business as classified by Xu Tan for average size of merchant firms in Shangdong province during 18-19th centuries. In Xu’s classification of large, medium and small scale business, the medium were the most numerous ranging from 35% in the reigns of Jiaqing (1796-1820) to 57% of the total number of firms in Daoguang (1821-1850).⁹ An alternative calculation put the Tong Taisheng annual profit equivalent to the annual income of 20 village school teachers – or that of a middle level farmer family - in addition to its paid employees.¹⁰ For anybody familiar with the landmark study on Chinese rural markets by William Skinner (1977), Da Liu town and the Tong Taisheng firm are almost a postcard illustration of the standard market towns across Northern China during the Qing. They appear both average and typical among the tens of thousands of mercantile stores and market towns across 19th century China, modest, inconspicuous and undistinguished.

Just as we thought we had got to the end of the thread on this archive, a completely unrelated browse through a book titled *History of Retail Business in Modern Shanghai* (上海近代百货商业史) (1988) took us on an entirely unexpected and opportune turn. On page 10 of this book, a footnote (yes, another footnote) mentioned a Tong Taisheng grocery store

⁸ Ningjin County Gazette, vol. 2, pp. 25-27.

⁹ For estimates on Tong Taisheng, see Ma and Yuan (in progress), Xu Tan’s classification can be found in Xu 1998, pp. 186-187.

¹⁰ See Yuan, Macve and Ma 2013 on the calculation.

located in Daliu of Ningjing county. It cited a newspaper report published in the *Central Daily* (中央日报) in August 13th of 1936 by Wei Zheyin, which discussed the traditional Chinese accounting system based on the TTS merchant account book. The Wei article in the *Central Daily* takes us to another article by Wàn, Sīnián (万斯年) published in *Ta Kung Pao* 大公报, Supplement (Books) on August 8th of 1935 and to the following critical passage on the source of this archive:

“While the Peiping library (today’s National Library of China) had long intended to collect the account book materials, it was prevented from doing so due to its busy engagement in other priorities. Last winter, suddenly the Library received a letter from Mr. Róng Mèngyuán (荣孟源) from Dàliǔ Town, Níngjīn County. Mr. Róng indicated his wiliness to offer his collection of old account books to the Library, which we very much welcome. Mr. Róng noted these account books had information on rural economy and commodity prices. He did not ask for any remuneration except for the shipping cost from Níngjīn to Peiping [Beijing]. We are of course grateful to such a hearty donation.

.....

It is reported that the account books arrived in a rather messy condition in two boxes. After a rough compilation by Mr. Jìnghé Zhào (赵静和), we arrive at a total of 145 volumes for the reign of Jiāqìng (1796-1820], and 323 volumes for the reign of Dàoguāng [1821-1850]. The earliest volume dates back to the 3rd Year of Jiāqìng (1798), and the final volume goes to the 30th Year of Dàoguāng (1850), covering a span of more than fifty years. Dating back to more than 130 years from now, these account books are indeed a rare find.”

While most descriptions in both Wei (1936) and Wan (1935) matched with what we have been able to find independently in the extant TTS account books, Wan’s tally of all the volumes added up to a total of 475 volumes, more than the 432 volumes we have been able to locate so far. In addition, a comment in Wei (1936) that seems uncannily prescient of what was to happen to traditional Chinese archival materials: “.... after the Rong family business declined since the reign of Tongzhi (1862-1875), these account books covering several decades would have looked like a pile of waste papers to laymen or just good materials for wallpaper.” Yet alas, continued Wei, “thanks to the conservative and “nostalgic” nature of our people, remarkably, this set of account books was preserved within the Rong family.”

III. The Man behind the Archive

The key man mentioned above, Mr Rong Mengyuan (1913-1985), as it turned out, was

no average donor. In the People's Republic of China founded from 1949, Mr Rong was an eminent historian on modern China and an authority on historical archives of the Qing and Republican period. He was the author of more than 70 journal articles, and multiple volumes of works on archival materials of major political events such as the Taiping and Boxer Rebellions, as well as the 1911 Revolution. He was also the founding editor of the Journal "Archives on Modern History" (近代史资料) that published continuously from 1954.

Mr. Rong was survived by four children. On May 3rd of 2012, we interviewed his son, Mr. Rong Weimu, the only one among his children to succeed the profession of the elder Rong. Mr Rong Weimu is currently a senior researcher at the same Modern History Institute and also serves as one of the editors of "Archives on Modern History", the Journal originally founded by his father. We also tracked down the Rong Genealogy last published in 1903 (archived in Nankai University in Tianjin). Based on these and other materials, we are able to piece together the profile of the Rong lineage in Ningjin county, and the man and the history behind the archive.

The Rong Genealogy last printed in 1903 was the culmination of six previous editions, tracing back perhaps as many as 16 generations over a span of 491 years. The previous editions or updates of the Genealogy were in 1894 (by the 16th generation), 1880 (14th generation), 1813 (no indication of generation), 1771 (10th generation), 1756 (9th generation), 1745 (8th generation), 1717 and 1719 (8th generation).¹¹ The Rong family first migrated from Zhu Cheng 诸城 (also in Shandong province) to Da Liu in Ningjin in 1404 during the early Ming dynasty. Starting as farmers, the lineage, through diligence and thrift, amassed a certain amount of wealth and began to engage in a money lending business as well as some charity activities in the local town by the third generation (possibly during the 17th century). By its sixth generation (about the early 18th century), the Rong lineage claimed to have accumulated over 300 mu of land.¹² But by then, the Rong family wealth took a hard beating and was nearly depleted in a series of bitter legal disputes, over financial matters, with

¹¹ All years were converted to Western calendar from original imperial calendars with corresponding years: Guangxu 20, Guangxu 6, Jiaqing 18, Qianlong 36, Qianlong 21, Qianlong 10, Kangxi 56 and 58.

¹² A mu was traditional Chinese land measure roughly equivalent to 0.16 acres.

another lineage by the name of Yin. The seventh and eighth generation managed a comeback rebuilding the family wealth through trade activities. In particular, a member of the eighth generation (1673 – 1740) “trudged through the muddy trading routes” and contributed to the revival of family prosperity. Like generation of successful merchant lineages all over China, the Rongs turned to investment in the education of their offspring to enter the highly competitive ranks of the Civil Examination System, a critical step up the ladder in the Chinese political and social hierarchy.¹³ The efforts seemed to pay off with the genealogy reporting steady progress with members attaining low level degree of Shengyuan and from the ninth generation on, recording successive entries in the ranks of the official examination system. Meanwhile, family wealth and business clearly stabilized with the rise in social and political status secured by these examination achievements. Moving into the 19th century – the period recorded in the TTS account – the Rong lineage wealth may have peaked with the 12th and 13th generations adding newly purchased land of 800 and 300 mu to the family wealth. The Rongs were clearly the elite of the town as a member of the 13th generation was the trusted person in town who would be called upon to mediate and resolve village disputes.

The prosperity of the Rongs continued beyond the mid-19th century, the period in which the extant TTS archive comes to an end. In fact, during the Guangxu reign (1875 – 1908), members of the 14th and 16th generation attained the much higher degrees of Juren and Jinshi in China’s examination rank. These may be signs that the Rongs were starting to gain a foothold in the higher echelons of the Late Qing political hierarchy as attested to by a marriage liaison with a member of the lineage of Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837-1909), one of China’s most powerful officials of the era.¹⁴ Our interview with Rong Weimu also confirmed that the Rongs in the early 20th century was still reasonably prosperous, allegedly owning nearly half of the houses in the local Daliu town. Besides the retail business, they also operated a few cottage workshops in flour milling, processing of vinegar and so on. The family also managed some agricultural cultivation largely based on the use of long and short-term laborers.

¹³ For the importance role of Chinese Civil Service Examination system in traditional China, see Ho 1962. There are three levels of examination degrees starting from Shangyuan, to Juren and Jinshi.

¹⁴ Based on the Rong Genealogy and also our oral interview with Mr. Rong Weimu.

Like millions of Chinese elites in traditional China, the Rongs' route to such status was secured through generations of mercantile thrift and land acquisition legitimized through their entries into the National Civil Service Examination. But from the second half of the 19th century, the world that the Rong lineage had thrived in for 14-16 generations was slowly falling apart, triggered initially by the forced opening by the mid-19th century Opium War. In 1894, the year the penultimate edition of the Rong Genealogy was printed the Qing was about to enter into a disastrous naval defeat by a newly rising modern Japan. And two years after the final 1903 edition of the Rong Genealogy was compiled, the Civil Service Examination itself was once and for all abolished by the late-Qing Constitutional Reform.

Two years after Mr. Rong Mengyuan was born, the Qing dynasty collapsed completely in 1911. He received education in a traditional private school (私塾) but also enrolled in one of the new style secondary schools that emerged gradually following the abolition of the Civil Service Examination in 1905. In 1931, Rong went to Beijing to study in a graduate program in Chinese history headed by Luu Zhengyu 吕振羽, a prominent Marxist historian teaching in Zhongguo University.¹⁵ It was probably there that Rong Mengyuan directly participated in Communist activities. Due to health reasons, Rong soon had to prematurely quit the graduate program and return to Nanjing for recuperation. Following Japan's full scale invasion of Chinese Manchuria in 1932, Rong joined the anti-imperialist and anti-Japanese campaign and shuttled between Nanjing and Beijing. We can see that it was during this period that he donated the TTS archive to Academic Sinica in 1935.

In 1936, Rong Mengyuan re-emerged to join the Communist Party in 1936 and two years later travelled to Mao's Communist base in Yan-an in Shaanxi province. There Rong became a teacher in the High School which was later to become the Yan-An University. But according to Rong Weimu, this is also where Rong Mengyuan's political trouble started as he got himself entangled in a bitter dispute over the appropriation of a dug-out residence with Gao Gang (高岗) who was at the time very powerful Communist leader. The eventual intervention by Mao himself worked against Rong Mengyuan. The dispute was to prove costly for Rong as he was stripped of his Party membership in 1941 which essentially

¹⁵ In an article commemorating Mr. Liu, Mr. Rong fondly recalled his encounter with his Marxist historian mentor, see Rong 1983.

doomed his political career.¹⁶ Rong Weimu believed that his father's subsequent focus on the historical archive may have been a career strategy given the relatively "factual" and neutral nature of archival material.

The founding of PRC in 1949 brought a new political era that turned the Marxist historiography into an official ideology and at the same time brought Mr. Rong Mengyuan, the archivist, the promise of an intellectual career. He began to work tirelessly assisting Mr. Fan Wenlan 范文澜, then China's designated official Marxist historian, on the archival aspects of a new Marxist Chinese history textbook. In 1954, he launched the journal "Archives on Modern History". All of this only deepens the mystery: how one of China's most eminent archivists for the remainder of his life managed to remain largely unengaged with a set of his family accounts that he himself had offered up in the 1930s. For that, we turn to the evolution of Chinese historiography in the modern era.

IV. The Anonymity

The era of the 1930s - the formative years of the young Rong Mengyuan's intellectual career - came on the heels of China's New Cultural movement that ushered in the ideology of modernization and modern academic scholarship (see Sun 1986). Two decades of scholarships based on the use of statistical analysis of social surveys, pioneered initially by Western sociologists based in China, had begun to bear fruit with a series of landmark studies (see Li Zhangpeng 2008). In particular, Sydney Gamble – a Western sociologist based in Yenching University in Beijing - and his Chinese colleagues pioneered the use of private merchant account archives to extract economic information about China's past (Meng and Gamble 1926, Gamble 1942).¹⁷ In this regard, the preservation and utilization of TTS archive is no accident as the men whose hands had touched the archive, - Rong Mengyuan,

¹⁶ As is well-known, Gao Gang himself became the victim of the first wave of Communist purges in the early 1950s.

¹⁷ Gamble (1943) utilized what seemed a large collection of merchant account books of a fuel store near Beijing roughly for the period of 1790-1850, almost identical to that of TTS account. Unfortunately, the existence and location of the original accounts remain unknown. See discussion in Allen et al 2012.

Wei Zeyin, and Yan Zhong Ping – belonged to a generation of scholars born out of China's early 20th century “modernization” movement that infused private merchant archives a new sense of purpose beyond mere personal and familiar nostalgia.

Another academic trend – perhaps far more consequential and foreboding both professionally and personally for Mr. Rong and generations of Chinese historians to come, is the introduction of Marxist historiography known as Historical Materialism. As revealed by Feng Tianyou, the introduction of Marxism was intimately connected with the writings of the Soviet leadership and Communist International based in Moscow as well as the works of influential Chinese Communist leaders including those such as Chen Duxou 陈独秀 and later Mao Zedong. Nonetheless, the intellectual scheme to classify Chinese history into stages progressing from primitive, to slavery, feudalism and capitalism in the Marxist framework of modes of production and stages of social development generated vigorous and sometimes ferocious debates within China. They engulfed academics and scholars of different camps and persuasions ranging from the orthodox Marxist historians such as Guo Muruo 郭沫若, Lu Zhengyu to liberal intellectuals such as Hu Shi 胡适 and neo-Confucian scholars such as Liang shumin 梁漱溟 (see Feng 2006).

But debates of the kind in the 1930s were to become a thing of the past following the rise of the PRC in 1949. The historical frame embedded in dogmatic version of the Marxist Historical Materialism was slowly turning into a harsh political reality in a regime that was becoming increasingly totalitarian. The relations of production as expressed in the Marxist stages of social development were transformed into a form of identity politics that distinguished between the oppressors and the oppressed, the exploiters and the exploited – with the former represented by proletariat, the workers and peasants and the latter by capitalists, the merchants and landlords. The political movement to classify the population according to their “birth origin” often traced far back into their ancestry in the pre-Communist era and laid the ideological foundation for massive political persecution such as the anti-rightist campaign in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976.

These may explain Rong's seeming reticence on his family merchant account archive given the political environment and given that his father was, on the record, classified as a

“landlord”.¹⁸ Rong himself never seems to have mentioned the TTS archive once in his own voluminous works. Neither was his family, according to Rong Weimu, aware of the TTS archive or the Rong Genealogy. We know Rong Mengyuan himself seemed acutely aware of the “birth origin” politics in the 1950s. With a bit of irony, in an article originally published in 1955, Rong deployed the birth origin rhetoric against his academic mentor’s old foe, Hu Shi:

“How much land did Hu Shi family own? He himself did not explain, but he did say that every autumn, he will follow his grandmother to the field to supervise harvesting by tenants. Hence, his family indeed is that of a landlord...”

“Hu Shi’s family has three stores (as far as I know)... Judging from his late snobbish attitude, mercantile ideas must have had a large influence on him... Hu Shi clearly inherited the tradition of a bureaucratic-landlord-merchant family.” (Rong 1955/1983 p. 371):

Rong’s invocation of Mr Hu’s “birth origin” in intellectual debates was beyond ironic. Only two years later, he was feted with the same tactics during the infamous 1957 anti-Rightist campaign. In an article published in the People’s Daily (August 14th 1957), the Chinese Communist Party’s official mouth piece, it denounced the then disgraced “Rightist”, Rong Mengyuan:

“Rong Mengyuan’s anti-party activities had been consistent throughout. Born in a “*landlord*” family, he joined the (Communist) revolutionary cause in 1932, only to betray it in a critical juncture... By concealing his personal counter-revolutionary history, he sneaked back into the Party... He continued with his anti-Party activities in Yan-an in 1941 ... only to be expelled.... By the end of 1953, the Party criticized his factionalist anti-party activities within the Research Institute... But in the end, it was to no avail as Mr. Rong remained an inveterate anti-revolutionary and should be condemned as a crook in the history profession.”

It is striking to see that Mr. Rong’s brief respite back to his hometown of Ninjing in 1932-35 (due to health reasons according to our interview with Rong Weimu) – during which he denoted the TTS archive to Beijing – was now trumped up as his “betrayal” of the party

¹⁸ According to Rong Weimu, Rong Mengyuan’s father, Rong Xinhuan 荣星桓, became a sympathizer to the Communist cause in the early 20th century and sheltered the Eighth Route Army, a branch of the Communist guerrilla force. After the Communist takeover, Mr. Rong Xinhuan was classified as a “landlord” in the PRC era. In a reversal of fortune, the long-term labourer who once worked for the Rong family became a party official with a glorious 32 years Communist party membership. But in the new China, the labourer looked after the elderly Mr. Rong Xinhuan, apparently to repay the past kind deeds of his former landlord .

“in a critical juncture.” Perhaps the biggest irony is that amongst the accusations this article levelled against Mr. Rong is his stance on the relative “objectivity” in the direct quotation of original archival materials to the often subjective and interpretative commentary on historical materials with no direct presentation (People’s Daily August 14th 1957). In the end, Rong’s one time strategy to seek safe haven in the relative “neutrality” of archival material then became his original sin.

It is unclear whether Yan et al’s omission of any mention of the Rong origin of the TTS account is either a rational survival strategy or sheer neglect. Although we may never find out the truth directly as none of the eleven authors in the Yan et al statistics volume currently survive, we are inclined to believe the former scenario is closer to the truth given the political atmosphere of the period and given that there is strong evidence that Yan Zhongping himself or members the group were well-aware of Rong himself and his connection to the TTS archive.¹⁹ We have no doubt that “identity” politics certainly remained foremost in the minds of the authors involved in the Yan et al team project on the 1955 statistical volume. In a summary report published in 1956 in “Economic Research” – China’s major economic journal - by Yan Zhongping to recount the experience of compiling the statistical volume no mention is made of specific archives such as TTS but instead provided a comprehensive summary of the motivation and processes behind Yan et al’s team project on historical statistics. There, you can already detect the increasingly political tension between the identity of the owner or producer of statistics and the nature of the statistics themselves. Yan remarked that:

“...during the 1920s and 30s, many Chinese bourgeoisie scholars had compiled various economic surveys and historical statistics. Although their works deserve to be utilized, we should take note that these materials, even those that were not deliberately distorting facts, were usually so full of bourgeoisie concepts that historical truth (in the material) became muddled.”

¹⁹ Mr. Yan started working for the Social Science Research Institute of Academic Sinica in 1936, the same year when Wei Zheyin who was also affiliated with the Sociological Research Institute of Academic Sinica. Later, the Modern History Institute of Academic Sinica, where Rong Mengyuan had long been associated, and the Institute of Economic Research where the Yan et al research group were based, are both subordinate institutions of the CASS (now referred as the Chinese Academy of Social Science, which partially emerged from the previous Academic Sinica) from the 1950s onward.

Apparently, the problem becomes even more serious if these statistics were compiled by “foreign imperialists” as Yan made his defence of the use of Western language material:

“Amongst our comrades, a minority of them believed that since foreign language material was produced by Imperialists, they cannot be reliable and should not be accepted as these Imperialists were speaking from the stance of aggressors. They should not be used even when no comparable Chinese records existed. This view, however, is narrow-minded. While duly recognizing the aggressive nature of the Imperialists, but the Imperialists may still inadvertently divulge their criminal deeds,” which presumably would be useful information for research purposes.²⁰

These statements of justification, comic now, were actually no laughing matter then. They may be considered sprinkles of sanity on the eve of China’s maddening decent into the abyss of Great Leap Forward that saw the massive destruction, falsification or fabrication of statistics, partly leading to the loss of tens of millions of lives in the ensuing Great Leap Famine of 1959-61.

In this regard, Rong’s anonymity and Yan et al’s reticence turned out to be a blessing in disguise or golden silence. While the TTS archive languished in anonymity for the next three decades, Mr. Rong - despite being labeled the outright “Rightist” – and his family, according to Rong Weimu, managed to lay low and get through with relatively mild phases of persecutions. By the late 1960s, Yan Zhongping himself, like millions of other intellectuals, was banished to the countryside for “reform” education. Yan was said to have maintained his research activities but his focus switched from the 19-20th century China towards to the 15th century European colonization of South America. It was, as he later recalled, a survival strategy with the belief that the further you go back in history and the farther you move away from China in space, the lesser the political risk to the research.²¹ It was an irony of fate – or cruelty - that those very scholars that had once championed the same cause of “modernization” - or more precisely, this time in the name of Communism - and put

²⁰ It is also interesting to note that Yan actually went to UK in 1947 on a scholarship for three years, where he systematically collected a large amount of English language materials related to the Opium War. In 1950, Yan returned to the new China with all these materials but was only able to make limited use of them.

²¹ Information based on <http://www.baike.com/wiki/%E4%B8%A5%E4%B8%AD%E5%B9%B3> accessed Sept. 13th 2013.

themselves at the service of the new regime in the 1950s soon had to run and hide under the cover of anonymity from the very archives they had once unveiled to the public.

V. From “Wallpapers” to Public Archive

It was not until Deng Xiaoping’s reform era from the late 1970s that saw the full resurrection and rejuvenation of both Rong Mengyuan and Yan Zhongping’s once interrupted academic careers. In the 1980s (right until his death in 1985), Rong emerged as well-respected and authoritative scholar on Chinese historical archives with a prolific publication record. Similarly, Yan Zhongping re-emerged as China’s pre-eminent authority on modern Chinese economic history during the 1980s. Yan founded the Chinese economic history association and served as its first President. Many members of the original 1955 Yan et al team had also re-energized their academic career and found themselves quickly at the forefront of the “sprouts of capitalism” debate which took on renewed energy and direction in the more relaxed political setting of the 1980s.

Despite years of trials and tribulations, Rong Mengyuan’s writings during the 1980s continued to be infused with a stridently leftist rhetoric. In his 1983 volume, which included his 1955 article on Hu Shi, Rong made a point to add a footnote lamenting the attempts by some people to revamp the reputation of Hu Shi as a scholar. How could anyone, asked Rong in 1983, rehabilitate Hu Shi, a running dog of imperialism, feudalism, bureaucratic-capitalism? (pp. 382-3).²² Rong Mengyuan died in 1985 an unwavering believer in the Communist cause and ideology.

The new policies of economic reform and open-door policies in the 1980s heralded a dramatic U-turn in ideology and the “identity politics,” leaving intellectuals in the generation of Rong Mengyuan left behind again. Indeed, those one-time capitalists, “exploiters” and “oppressors” were now re-embraced by the new regime as entrepreneurs in the new market economy, as illustrated the dramatic reversal of fortune of Rong Mengyuan’s distance relative based in the Lower Yangzi region. The Shandong origin of the Rong Mengyuan lineage may

²² Rong Weimu confirmed that the leftist rhetoric in Rong Mengyuan’s writing reflected his true belief rather than rhetoric for the purpose of self-protection, something seen quite common among intellectuals who had survived the Cultural Revolution era. Similarly, Yan’s one labelled Christopher Columbus a “colonizing pirate” and a “lunatic” in previous research.

have linked them to that of powerful Rong brothers who were China's most illustrious industrial tycoons in pre-Communist Shanghai. The lineage of the Rong brothers originated in Jining 济宁, Shandong province and later migrated to Wuxi, in Jiangsu province. From the end of the 19th century, the Wuxi Rong brothers moved to then treaty port of Shanghai and built a formidable industrial conglomerate, hailed as the "King" of cotton and flour, the symbol of modern Chinese industrial entrepreneurship. After two decades of laying low as a denigrated former capitalist, Mr. Rong Yiren 荣毅仁, the son of the younger Rong brothers, re-emerged from the 1980s as China's new patriot entrepreneurs and dramatically rose the political rank of Vice President of the nation (1993-1998).²³

This reversal of fortune also shined less well-known former capitalists. The prodigious discovery of merchant accounts and archives in Huizhou of Anhui province and the remarkable preservation of the city of Ping Yao where the Shanxi Bankers were once centred have now entered into pop culture appearing in TV drama series and movies as a showcase of China entrepreneurial tradition. It also offers a stunning paradox that the two inland provinces of Anhui and Shanxi - currently laggards in most measures of economic development, commercialization and entrepreneurship - had once boasted China's greatest and best-educated merchant communities. But this prodigious discovery or rediscovery of the Huizhou and Shanxi merchants through their archives or architecture may also be due to – like our TTS archive – the fortune of relative anonymity. Both the Huizhou region and the city of Ping Yao (and the surrounding towns), geographically isolated, have been bypassed by coastal-region based economic modernization of the early 20th century and also spared the ravages of political persecution such as the Cultural Revolution due to their insignificance and anonymity.²⁴

The well-known example is the now legendary Chinese traditional Shanxi bankers that thrived in the 19th century. The massive Shanxi volume compiled by Huang Jianzhong started

²³ Based on <http://baike.baidu.com/view/680816.htm> accessed Sept. 13th 2013.

²⁴ For works based on Huizhou merchant archives, see Liu 2003, Liu and Xie 2005, Wang 2010, Fan 2010 and Ruan 1996. For merchant account archives from Shanxi bankers, see Kong 2005, Huang et al 2005. On the other hand, Endymion Wilkinson's revised and enlarged *Chinese History Manual* mentioned sparingly the merchant account archive.

with a tale that the account book pages of the original account books of China's first Shanxi banking house, Rishengchuan - now proudly displayed in what is the popular Shanxi bankers museum in the city of Pingyao of Shanxi province – were rescued in 1995 from the wallpaper used in the original site, which had fortunately survived the radical Cultural Revolution era (166-1976) (Huang, p. 1 of notes to the supplementary second volume 2002). Recent new works on Shanxi merchant archives led Mr. Li Zhangjin – himself a Beijing-based modern investment banker of Shanxi origin – to argue with confidence and optimism on the bright prospects of a new economic history, accounting history, business and financial history that can be rediscovered and reconstructed from grassroots merchant accounts (pp.304-7).

Nonetheless, historical discontinuities and ideological reversals do carry real consequences. As Li Zhangjin remarked, drawing from his own personal experience in archival collection, because business accounts were viewed as the records of the rich, the “landlord” or “bourgeoisie” – hence the records of exploitation and oppression in the Mao era – among those that survived, covers were often torn away or the name of the merchant was scratched out from the cover for self-protection. When the value of these records was rediscovered by academics, a market emerged to exploit them often with activities carried out by petty merchants who would frequently visit private homes going door to door to sell. In order to maximize the sale values of these volumes – often at the expense of researchers – these small-time archival traders would divide a complete set of archives into disparate piles for sale, often inadvertently mixing or mislabeling files in the process (pp. 308-9).

In this regard, the complete and integrated nature of the TTS – thanks to its peculiar history - stands as an outstanding anomaly. But even here anonymity carried a price. After all, three decades' worth of potential research scholarship was lost while the TTS remained largely unexamined, leaving Chinese economic history with a glaring statistical abyss especially with regards to the current Great Divergence debate. Given the revival and accumulation of the archival research over the last decades, we are confident of new scholarship on Chinese historical statistics that will bring new insights into the past..²⁵

Conclusion:

²⁵ See Yuan and Ma 2010 for a summary of some of these new studies.

From beneath the small-font footnotes emerges an extraordinary living tale of a private merchant archive owned by an ordinary merchant family in 19th century rural China. The journey of a pile of traditional archive materials through its initial donation, to subsequent anonymity and our rediscovery divulges a personal story of individuals surviving through contradictions, ironies or even betrayals. It is a tale of a nation caught up in a manifest destiny to confront 19-20th century Western challenges, in the process of which saw herself turned upside down a couple of times over by the overpowering forces of ideology and politics and her historiographical traditions ruptured, re-joined, and sometimes reinvented.

Our story offers useful lessons on the nature and quality of historical evidences – quantitative or otherwise – used in debates such as the Great Divergence. It is likely our knowledge of, and sources of evidence on the past are shaped as much by how posterity studied the past as by the past itself - assuming there existed such an “objective” and “abstract” past. The preservation, compilation, utilization and ultimately the discovery or re-discovery of historical evidences are themselves profoundly dependent on the changing tempo of our research agenda, ideologies and paradigms. But more importantly, as academic research increasingly fall within the realm of the provision of public goods, political enlightenment and state capacity crucial to the rise of academic communities, research infrastructures and the distribution of public resources are having increasingly positive impact on the quality of research and hence our knowledge of the past. Indeed, one can say here what happened in China during the 1950s began to matter for our understanding of what happened in 1850s and before.

Much of the inspiration on the recent Great Divergence debate may have come from scholarly attempts to search for the historical origin of China’s miraculous economic growth during the past three decades after prolonged phases of lagging behind. It is not surprising that with the growth of the economy a new revisionist scholarship emerges that begins to unveil a newly discovered degree of sophistication and a sense of the rationality of the ancient economy. Hence, it does not come as a total surprise to see the Tokugawa legacy once bemoaned by the early Meiji reformers quickly gained new glory in a new modern Japan.²⁶

²⁶ For Japan, statistical compilation of price and wage data can be found in Mitsui Bunko (ed.) (1989). and Miyamoto, M. (ed.) (1963). For recent studies on prices, interest rates and wages on early modern Korea, see the

Can one apply the same logic to the whole literature on the Medieval or early modern origin of Industrial Revolution in Western Europe or in England? Does China's astounding economic rise during the last three decades create an irresistible tendency globally towards a sort of "bubble" in Chinese historical work which has left academics worldwide more ready to jump on the bandwagon and embrace the idea of higher initial conditions in 18th century Qing China with or without sufficient evidence? It is our hope that painstaking research on the TTS archive – with full awareness of the historiographical upheavals in China's past century – could bring forth solid empirical evidence that will stand beyond the age of "bubbles".

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